

## **A Stronger Signal by darthstormer**

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**Summary:** \*\*S3 Spoilers\*\* Radios were El's lifeline to the world, and when they began to fail her, she knew she had to go bigger. One-Shot drabble from who-knows-where.

## A Stronger Signal

El loved radios.

It was an unusual love, to be sure, but radios had played an important role in her life and pushed her in the directions she was destined to go. At first, they provided the calm static that helped to clear her mind and push out into the Void to find people. She found a certain kind of peace in the simple chaos pouring out of the speakers as she would ready herself for the mental journey. Though she could never explain it, she could also use the strong signals reaching a radio to push further, letting her mind ride the waves outward.

Radios were her connection to a larger world.

Later, they were a lifeline back to those she loved. Sitting alone in the cabin, El would busy herself with books and puzzles and soap operas, but always in the back of her mind, she listened for the familiar beeping of the old radio in the corner. If he needed to reach her, to let her know he would be late or just making sure she was alright, Hopper would tap out a message in Morse code for her. Likewise, if she ever needed him, all she had to do was pick up the handset and tap out the signal they had established early on: . . . - - - . - - .; HOP. Sometimes she had to tap it out a few times before he heard, but she could always use it to get to him.

In denial about what happened that terrible night beneath the mall, El would often lay in bed late into the night, radio in hand, tapping out the familiar signal. HOP. HOP. HOP. She knew a response wasn't coming, but she tapped it out all the same. Mike heard, Mike understood, Mike's heart broke for her loss. El knew Mike probably heard, but they never spoke of it.

In happier times, the radio was also the connection to her friends. The boys and Max had pooled their money and bought her a SuperComm of her own that first Christmas when she came back into their lives. With it, she could call them any time, wherever they were. The world as she knew it, was in her hands.

Until it wasn't.

Even years later, El could remember the heartbreak of moving day. Saying goodbye to her friends, goodbye to another home, a renewed and painful goodbye to Hopper, and finally, saying goodbye to Mike. He made sure she had her radio, and lots of fresh batteries. They arranged a time that very night he was going to call, taking over the radio Dustin had built, so he could reach her. They had driven all day, unloaded the truck, and El was sitting in her new bedroom unpacking boxes. She watched the clock carefully, counting down the minutes until the appointed time.

"El? Come in El. Are you there?"

Her heart stopped, and for just a moment, everything felt right again.

"I'm here Mike. I read you. Over."

"El? Come in El. Are you there?"

She stared at the radio in her hands for a moment, before keying the button on the side again.

"I can hear you, Mike. Can you hear me? Over."

"El? Come in El. Are you there?"

"Will!" El yelled desperately down the hall, summoning her new brother to her room. "I can hear him, but he can't hear me."

Together, they sat first in the middle of her bedroom, then out in the driveway, then up on the roof, adjusting the radio's dials and desperately trying to answer Mike. Will's own handset proved just as ineffective and all they could do was listen helplessly as Mike continued to reach out. He was up on the hill, far from a telephone, and their own phone wasn't due to be hooked up for another two days. Cerebro had a strong enough signal to reach them, but that did nothing to make up for the limited transmitter strength of their own handsets to call back.

After thanking Will for all he had done, and accepting a sympathetic hug of condolence, El crawled into bed with her radio and just listened in tears as Mike's pleas grew in desperation. She made it several hours before finally drifting off, though Mike's voice drifted

across the speaker long after that. He would never say just how long he kept at it that night, and she never had the heart to ask.

Waking early the next morning, El decided she wasn't just going to accept the helpless power of her own radio. After borrowing a handful of change from Will, she set out in search of a pay-phone. It was Sunday, and she knew Mike's family would be at church until 10:30. They usually got home around 11:00, and she gave it an extra fifteen minutes before she dialed.

Hearing his voice over the line renewed her spirits, and she quickly explained what had happened the night before; she could hear him fine, he just couldn't hear her. Then she stunned Mike with a request.

"How do I build one? A radio like Dustin's."

"I don't really know," Mike admitted. He had used the Heathkit at school plenty, but had never contemplated what went into building one of his own.

"Ask him," she said; an instruction, not a question.

A few days later, a thick envelope arrived from Hawkins with Dustin's notes from camp, diagrams, parts lists, everything they could think to include. Will and El poured over the materials and began to collect what they needed. Emboldened by a solid goal, El bravely stepped into the local Radio Shack, repair shops, thrift stores - any place that might have the pieces she needed - and set to work building. It took weeks, but finally she had it up and running. It had an odd hum, and would occasionally overheat when she tuned into the higher frequencies, but she was ready to make contact.

After arranging a fresh meeting time over the phone, El called out and finally got Mike on the radio. They were back in contact, free to talk to their hearts content. No longer limited by short, expensive long-distance phone calls, they finally had all the time in the world to discuss what was happening in their lives. It would be two weeks until Mike came for Thanksgiving, and month after that, she would be visiting him for Christmas, but for all the times in-between, they had the radio.

But El wanted more.

She knew real radios, built by people who knew what they were doing, didn't have those bad hums and they didn't threaten to burst into flames mid-conversation. She relied on Will to point her in the right direction at the library and then, armed with her very own library card, El set to work teaching herself everything she needed to know to make her radio the best it could possibly be. Will helped out with a few initial concepts, but she soon left him in the dust, confirming what they had all long suspected. El was incredibly intelligent, easily the brightest in the party. Any knowledge she was missing was due only a lack of exposure. Once she found a topic, and had the resources at hand, she soaked up the material like a sponge.

It took a few months, but El managed to assemble a radio that put Cerebro to shame, with the range she needed and the clarity that left her feeling like Mike was right there in the room with her. Then, she built another. It took a bribe consisting of several loads of laundry and a batch of chocolate chip cookies, but Jonathan drove her out to Hawkins one Saturday to surprise Mike with a radio of his own. No longer would he have to borrow time on Dustin's just to reach out to her.

Once again, things were good, until they weren't.

El was concerned as soon as Joyce called her to the phone, letting her know Mike was on the line. Now that they had the radios she had built, it was rare for him to ever resort to a phone-call.

"We have to shut off our radios," Mike said, sadly.

He went on to explain how he and Dustin had been called into the principals office to meet with an investigator from the FCC. It was easily the gentlest encounter they'd ever faced with a government official, but they had been served official notice they were breaking the law by operating radios of that strength without a proper license. There had been some leeway back in middle school with the Heathkit, since they were technically operating under Mr. Clarke's supervision, and he had his operators license. The bottom line was, if they were caught using the radios anymore, they would face fines and confiscation of their equipment. While Mike was left feeling

defeated at yet another barrier between them, El only had a single question for him.

"How do we get a license?"

They studied hard and got together in Hawkins to sit for the exam. El, Mike, and Dustin all walked away with Technician level licenses, sufficient to let them continue legally as they had been doing before; Mike and El to each other, and Dustin reaching out to Suzie, who was working on her own certification. El had blown away the examiner with her Morse-code proficiency, her speed surpassing his own at both transmitting and translation of received messages.

Driven to aim higher, El studied and tested for advanced licenses. She refined her radios, always striving to reach further, with a clearer signal. While her calls to Mike were always the best part of her day, the map on her wall was soon thick with push-pins marking all the people around the globe she had made contact with. It staggered her mind that the box of parts she had assembled with her own two hands reached its tendrils out into the world and put her in touch with people further than she ever imagined possible. She had been ecstatic to talk to someone in California, in a city not far from where Max grew up. Her voice had made it to Australia, South Africa and even a research base in Antarctica.

One of her proudest moments was making contact with the Soviet space-station Mir as it passed overhead one night. She had prepared for weeks, planning out a message and translating it into Russian. She had practiced for hours, making sure her pronunciation was just right. Everything had come together and she managed to speak with people passing 230 miles above her head and traveling at over 17,000 miles per hour. While it was a remarkable feat all on its own, El also saw it as another strike against her childhood. Papa had always told her the Soviets were the enemy and her greatest goal was to stop them. Instead, she was reaching out to two of them with warm greetings and asking about their view.

Mike listened in with quiet awe, proud of just how much she had accomplished. Life pulled them many directions, but always the radios were with her. Always, El reached out further, climbed higher, let her connection to the world at large spread out just as far as it

could.

Now, El was ready to take another big step forward. True, she hadn't built this radio, but she got to set it up and get it running, and she couldn't be happier. The precious equipment was secured and she was all buckled in, anxious to get underway, when a familiar voice came over her headset.

"Shuttle Atlantis. This is Houston. Ready for final comms check. Commander Stevens, how do you read?"

"Load and clear, Houston."

One by one, each crew member was addressed and comms were confirmed.

"Payload specialist Hopper, how do you read?"

"Loud and clear, Houston." El responded, a light flutter in her chest, still in disbelief this was really happening.

"Roger that. Comms check complete."

Pressing the green readiness button at the edge of his console, Mike Wheeler then switched over to the control room channel on his headset.

"Flight director, Mission Control Comms is a go for launch."

He knew he had a five minute window in the countdown before their duties would preclude any more conversation, so Mike switched over to an isolated communication channel.

"Specialist Hopper, secondary comms check."

"Roger Comms, go ahead." El responded, a new and far more pleasant set of butterflies filling her stomach.

"Safe flight, El. I love you."

"I love you too, Mike. See you in Florida."